

HARPER LEE TAKES A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE TO TELL THE STORY OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THIS MANNER OF EXPOSITION?

All children everywhere begin life innocent and without prejudice. It is as they grow and develop that their individual experiences of life sculpt and shape their personality. To a child, the world is an amazing place. They are on a constant search for knowledge and are incurably inquisitive. They see adults as figures of authority and generally accept their word as the truth, as their naivety does not allow them to comprehend lies and deception. However, children can be as cruel and selfish as they are innocent. Material possessions are of great importance to them and they will frequently disregard other people's feelings in pursuit of their own interest, often acting before considering the consequences. This inability to understand the complex repercussions of actions and events is a childish quality which Harper Lee makes full use of in her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

She tells the story through the eyes of Scout Finch, a young girl growing up in 1930s Alabama. Scout narrates as an adult, looking back on a difficult three years of her childhood. The novel is set in her home town of Maycomb, where she lives with her older brother Jem, father - Atticus - the local lawyer, and black housekeeper Calpurnia. Problems for the family begin when Atticus takes on the defence of Tom Robinson, a black labourer accused of raping a poor white woman. The town's people are outraged at his decision to defend Tom and do their best to make life difficult for the Finches. As the trial approaches, racial tensions mount and the children are subject to many insults and abuse by their ignorant peers. Despite Atticus's efforts, Tom is convicted and sent to prison, where he is shot trying to escape.

Although this is the main plot of the novel, there are several more trivial, yet no less important issues which Scout and Jem are concerned with during the story. The house next to theirs is occupied by a strange family, the Radleys, and rumour has it that Mr. Radley's son lives locked in the basement. The children nickname him 'Boo', and with their friend Dill, they spend days trying to make him come out. Everyone in Maycomb knows about him, and are all highly suspicious of the "malevolent phantom". According to Scout, "Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work." The children are intrigued by the mystery surrounding him and continue to torment him despite Atticus's warnings.

Throughout her novel, Harper Lee frequently draws the reader's attention to the way adults treat one another, two main examples being people's attitudes towards 'Boo' Radley and Tom Robinson; both of whom are victims of people's prejudices. Scout's observations of this are particularly effective because she is noticing them for the first time. Being a child, she is unable to understand fully why adults behave in such an irrational manner, and this adds a simplistic naivety to her narrative. It is clear to the reader that she sees things from an unbiased viewpoint; we can see this several times when she is describing "the simple hell people give other people." In many ways, Harper Lee portrays Scout as being far more sensible than most of the adult characters because of her open outlook on life. When Dill first meets Scout and Jem, he describes himself as "little but old." Although he actually meant that he was small for his age, this phrase could be applied to all three children in a different sense. As Harper Lee tries to make us appreciate in the story, they may only be children but, as far as basic human morals go, they could certainly teach the adults a thing or two.

The first few chapters are spent setting the scene and educating the reader about the ways of the people in Maycomb and how they relate to each other. One point which is emphasized is the importance of family background and social standing. Someone like Atticus is respected, not only because of his profession, but because his family have lived in Maycomb county for over 100 years.

On the other hand, the Ewell family are regarded as the town scum. They are extremely poor and live near the dump. The children in the family hardly ever attend school and their father is a layabout who lives off relief cheques from the council. Despite this, the Ewell family are not at the bottom of the social ladder. No matter how disgraceful their behaviour is, they are still seen as being above the town's black community. Scout, as a child, shows some understanding of the complex social pyramid which constitutes Maycomb. However, it is by looking back as an adult that she provides us with a deeper insight into the structure of the community. She comments that, "Being southerners, it was a source of shame to some members of the family that we had no recorded ancestors on either side of the Battle of Hastings." Family history and credible ancestry were also qualities which were desirable in Alabama at the time of the novel.

Scout and Jem's opinions on people and events are formed from what is familiar to them. For example, their father Atticus is a highly moral character with no prejudice and this attitude is echoed by his children. Also, they have grown up with Calpurnia.

Although Scout describes her as "tyrannical", she does not disrespect her. Both children see black people as hard working, decent individuals and nothing to be afraid of. A child from another family would have, without a doubt, been influenced by their parents' unfair ideas and biases. This is another reason why Scout makes the ideal choice of narrator, for, like Atticus, she is unbiased.

Being a member of the Finch family gives Scout a clear view of how Tom Robinson's case is progressing. She is able to provide the reader with a great amount of detail on how Atticus is feeling and the strain it is putting on him. However, he is not the only one to suffer. Scout frequently gets into fights defending her father and Jem is driven to attacking one of their elderly neighbour's prize flowers because her comments about Atticus infuriate him. From Scout, we get a good idea of how the case is affecting the family and, more importantly, how they are dealing with it. On more than one occasion, Scout asks Atticus awkward questions about it, but he is always honest and open with her. He too, has a very high regard for children and treats Scout and Jem as his equals. One night Scout overhears him telling his brother – Jack: "When a child asks you something, answer him. - Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults." Scout appreciates the honesty of her father, and again this rubs off on her; she is also very truthful and 'matter of fact.' At times this can be slightly flat, but on the whole, her youthful and straightforward approach is a valuable asset in explaining complicated issues.

According to Atticus, "Maycomb's usual disease" is racism and "reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up." He is eager to avoid arguments with his neighbours about the rights and wrongs of him defending Tom, and is civil to everyone despite what they may have said about him behind his back. However, on one occasion he is unable to avoid an unpleasant confrontation when a lynch mob threatens Tom Robinson at the jail. Scout, Jem and Dill follow Atticus to the jail and it is Scout's innocent intervention which defuses the heated situation. She starts asking simple questions to one of the men she recognises. Her innocence and friendliness puts them all to shame and they leave Tom unharmed.

The fact that Scout is a girl adds another perspective to a story, which is mainly of men, at a time when men had ultimate control over economics, politics and law. She herself in the story is a tomboy and longs to be accepted by Dill and Jem. She describes the ladies of Maycomb as being, "like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum." The two females who influence Scout are Calpurnia, and later,

Atticus's sister – Alexandra, who comes to stay with them for a while. She tries, without success to convert Scout into a "real lady". Scout is deeply resentful of this and dislikes her aunt. Through the character of Aunt Alexandra, Harper Lee highlights the hypocrisy and double standards of the people in Maycomb. Alexandra hosts a missionary circle meeting which a lot of the ladies in the town attend. They discuss the appalling conditions of tribes in the jungle. "The poverty, the darkness, the immorality" and what can be done about it, yet they turn a blind eye to the oppression of black people on their door step. Scout recognises this as shallow and hypocritical but concedes that one day she will have to join their society.

Throughout the novel, fear and prejudice are the dominant themes. At the beginning, we see how the children's fear of Boo Radley stems from their lack of knowledge of him. The adults, too, are at fault. 'Boo' is blamed for unexplained events and suspicion surrounds his entire family because they are "alien to Maycomb's ways." Tom Robinson is another easy target for people's anger and mistrust; their racist views ensure that he is judged before being tried. The entire black population are used as scapegoats for white people's shortcomings. They are criticized by the missionary group for being "sulky" and poor, both conditions having been inflicted on them by the 'superior' whites. Both 'Boo' and Tom are the mockingbirds of the novel's title. Neither had done anything wrong, but they were persecuted because of the ignorance and intolerance of others. Scout, as a child, cannot understand why this should happen and the innocent and simple manner in which she narrates the story highlights the senselessness of the adult behaviour. Through her detailed descriptions of family life, we are made to feel part of her world and therefore gain a deeper understanding of how Tom Robinson's case affects her family and the community as a whole. The contrast between her open mind and the ignorant bigotry of others is extremely important because of the nature of the issues dealt with in the novel. How she is reflecting on her childhood adds a different narrative level to the story and helps to clear up some of the things that as a child she did not completely grasp, without detracting from its simplistic style. This manner of exposition adds greatly to the character and appeal of Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*?

Select points that are relevant to this essay.

- When Jem and Scout Finch receive their first, longed-for air rifles, their instinctive desire to shoot birds is taken for granted. Their father refuses to teach them to shoot, but warns them that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird - the only time his children heard him call something a sin, reflecting how strongly he, and Lee, feel about this.
- Atticus is a good father to his children. He is wise and understanding and has more patience with them because of his age. He never beats them but they are still obedient. For example, Scout does not like school but he explains to her why she must go and promises they will still read together despite what Miss Caroline has said.
- Miss Maudie told Scout, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs." The Ewells certainly spent much time in people's "corncribs"; they collected welfare, hunted out of season, and generally benefited from much generosity - something that would have almost certainly been lacking had they been black. Tom Robinson, on the other hand, was a hard worker, a charitable person, and provided for himself.
- Scout repeatedly discovers ideas that are more suited to someone much older.
- "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird." This line, spoken by Atticus, sums up the heart of the novel. A mockingbird is a harmless bird that makes the world more pleasant with its song. In this novel, the mockingbird symbolizes Boo Radley and Tom Robinson, who were both peaceful people who never did any harm. To kill or harm them would be a sin.

- Although racism dooms the accused man, a prejudiced adult vengefully attacks the children on a dark night: they are unexpectedly delivered from real harm in the novel's climax by a mysterious, reclusive neighbour named "Boo" Radley.
- Tom Robinson's death was a defeat for justice and an insult to human nature. A mockingbird was shot and the readers learn how much of a sin it was.
- The story is poignantly and sentimentally told from the eyes of a six year old tom-boy - Jean Louise "Scout" Finch.
- The novel's readers must side with Tom Robinson, as the novel leaves no doubt of the injustice served him. There is much correlation between the would-be targets for Jem and Scout's bird shooting, and Bob Ewell's scapegoat - Robinson. Mockingbirds are chosen as targets by people too shallow and ignorant to recognize their true worth.
- Dill's spinsterish Aunt Stephanie Crawford fills the children's myth-making minds with even more horrifying images of the fearsome Boo Radley, who hasn't been seen since his family locked him up years earlier: 'There's a maniac lives there and he's dangerous...'
- Paralleling the imaginative dream world of the children is another contradictory and volatile adult world of social issues.

SAMPLE ESSAY: AUNT ALEXANDRA, MISS MAUDIE, AND OTHER WOMEN

Aunt Alexandra is Atticus's older sister. She is a proper Southern 'lady' who maintains a strict social code. She criticises Atticus for letting Scout run wild and when she moves into their home during Tom Robinson's trial, she urges Scout to wear dresses and become a proper lady. We first meet her when the family go to Finch's Landing for Christmas dinner and learn that she is prejudiced against black people and gossips in front of her grandson, Francis. (Chapter 9)

Lee uses the contrasts between Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie to explore the theme of tolerance in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They are roughly the same age and grew up as neighbours at Finch's Landing. But for all the background these women share, they couldn't be more opposite. Aunt Alexandra is very conscious of Maycomb's social mores, chooses to live within its constrictions, and "given the slightest chance she would exercise her royal prerogative: she would arrange, advise, caution, and warn." Even her clothing is tight and restrictive. Miss Maudie, on the other hand, sets herself towards the outside of Maycomb's conventionality. Like Atticus, she stays within bounds, but does follow her own code.

Although Miss Maudie is quick to welcome Aunt Alexandra as her new neighbour, she is also quick to take her to task. When Aunt Alexandra states, "I can't say I approve of everything he does, Maudie, but he's my brother," Miss Maudie reminds her that Atticus is doing a wonderful thing and that many in the town silently support him. Aunt Alexandra is also extremely critical of Atticus's parenting style, while Miss Maudie is much more sympathetic. But then, Miss Maudie has a delightful sense of humour, a trait Aunt Alexandra does not possess. Maudie expresses points on the book's themes just as Atticus does, and often explains things he has said.

Aunt Alexandra works hard at being feminine, but Miss Maudie doesn't seem to care about those things. She wears men's overalls when she works in the garden but is equally comfortable in more traditional garb. Aunt Alexandra has a personal quest to make Scout "behave like a sunbeam," but Miss Maudie accepts her as she is. Consequently, Scout finds in Miss Maudie a kindred spirit who helps her make sense of being female and, with Atticus, helps Scout develop tolerance. Miss Maudie treats the children in an adult manner, much like Atticus does. She never laughs at Scout's mistakes and she trusts the children to play in her yard within the boundaries she's set for them. Aunt Alexandra is "analogous to Mount Everest: ... cold and there" while Miss Maudie is warm enough to pop out her dentures for Scout to see. Aunt

Alexandra's prejudices are satirised as she thinks every family has a 'streak'. Lee puts her pronouncements in capital letters to catch her authoritative tone of voice: 'Every Third Merryweather Is Morbid'... All The Bufords Walk Like That'. (p145). Aunt Alexandra will not allow Scout to visit Calpurnia at home and is annoyed to learn that they have been to First Purchase church with her. Neither will she let Scout have Walter Cunningham home.

Miss Maudie has a quiet spirituality that shows itself only when taunted by "the foot-washers [who] think women are a sin by definition." Aunt Alexandra displays her beliefs much more publicly. She is active in the Missionary Society, (Chapter 23) which appears to be as much a social club as a religious organisation. Tolerance isn't a big part of the Missionary Society meetings, either. The ladies' lamentations over the living conditions of the Mrunas, an African tribe, leads to a discussion about how ungrateful the women believe Maycomb's African-American community to be. The ladies treat Scout badly by failing to respect her and teasing her, whereas Miss Maudie 'never laughed at me unless I meant to be funny'. The prejudiced Mrs Merryweather is satirised: 'she played her voice like an organ... in stately largo'. She fails to see the irony of her sympathy for the tribes they have been studying compared to her treatment of her black servant, who she reprimands for being grumpy, when she is upset about the trial, telling her to be more Christian. Another woman satirised is Mrs Farrow, who says 'sss' in an affected way: 'she had a curious habit of prefacing everything she said with a soft sibilant sound'. The alliteration here re-creates the sound, as well as Lee including it in the dialogue: 's-s-s Grace' (p256). The women use racist language such as 'darky', 'wool'. Mrs Merryweather criticises Atticus without mentioning his name, but Miss Maudie defends him. Aunt Alexandra gave her 'a look of pure gratitude'. When the news comes of Tom's death, she is worried and upset for Atticus, even though she doesn't approve of 'everything he does'. Perhaps we see her in a warmer light in this section of the text? The world of the women is criticised in chapter 24, as Scout reflects: 'People like Mr Heck Tate did not trap you with innocent questions to make fun of you'. The world of the ladies is all pleasant on the surface 'they smelled heavenly' but under the surface, they represent the worst of Maycomb as well as the best. After the news of Tom's death, Calpurnia goes with Atticus to break the news to his wife, and Scout finds herself allied to her aunt: if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, then so could I', as she helps to hand around the biscuits.

To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

A Chronology of Events in the Novel

Chapter 1

Introduction of Scout as narrator: recounting a childhood story.
Jem's broken arm: connects beginning with ending.
Simon Finch and Finch's Landing. Intro. to Calpurnia and Dill.
Description of Boo Radley legend.

Chapter 2

Scout's first day at school: September.
Miss Caroline and Scout argue about reading.
Miss Caroline humiliates Walter Cunningham: Scout explains.

Chapter 3

Walter comes to dinner: Scout is rude.
Miss Caroline meets Burris Ewell.
Atticus talks to Scout about reading and Miss C.

Chapter 4

Jem and Scout find presents in the tree stump from Boo.
Dill arrives for the Summer: children enact Radley story.

Chapter 5

Children talk to Miss Maudie.
Children try to put note through Radley's letter-box: Atticus stops it.

Chapter 6

Children look into Radley house: Jem's pants get caught.
Dill leaves: Jem goes back for his pants in the night.

Chapter 7

Scout in 2nd Grade: truth about Jem's trousers, more presents from Boo, tree stump is cemented up by Mr Radley

Chapter 8

First snow. Fire at Miss Maudie's house.

Chapter 9

Scout tries to hit Cecil Jacobs for calling Atticus a "nigger lover".
Scout talks to Atticus about racism.
Christmas at Finch's Landing: Aunt Alexandra and Uncle Jack.
Atticus explains to Uncle Jack why he is taking the Tom Robinson case.

Chapter 10

Atticus as a father, and the mad dog incident.

Chapter 11

Jem is 12 years old. Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose is described.
Jem cuts off her flower heads. Atticus makes him read to Mrs Dubose.
Mrs Dubose dies.

End of part one

Chapter 12

Scout explains how Jem is going through adolescence.
Jem and Scout go to Calpurnia's church: racial incident.
Calpurnia describes her own family and community.

Chapter 13

Aunt Alexandra comes to stay. Maycomb is described.
Atticus is instructed to glorify his family to the children.

Chapter 14

Atticus defines rape for Scout.
Aunt Alex wants to get rid of Calpurnia.
Jem and Scout argue. Dill is found under the bed.

Chapter 15

Sheriff Heck Tate comes to Atticus' door with Maycomb men.
Atticus guards Tom Robinson at the jail.
Confrontation with Maycomb men, children diffuse the situation.

Chapter 16

Atticus explains racial tension and the reasons for the confrontation over breakfast.
Build-up to the trial: children describe Mr Dolphus Raymond. Trial begins.

Chapter 17

Mr Heck Tate is the first witness.
Mr Robert Ewell is the rude witness.

Chapter 18

Miss Mayella Ewell is questioned as the plaintiff.

Chapter 19

Mr Tom Robinson is questioned as the accused.

Chapter 20

Recess: children talk to Mr Dolphus Raymond.
Atticus makes his summarising speech to the jury.

Chapter 21

Calpurnia approaches the Judge with info for Atticus regarding the children being in court. They plead with Atticus to stay to hear the verdict.
Verdict of "guilty" is given: black people stand as Atticus leaves the court.

Chapter 22

Jem cries. Food from the black community.
Miss Maudie talks to the children about Atticus' role.

Chapter 23

Ewell spits at Atticus in the streets.
Atticus and Jem have a discussion about the trial.
Atticus and Aunt Alexandra argue about the children: dub the Cunninghams.

Chapter 24

Aunt Alex and her missionary circle meet.
Tom Robinson's death is announced by Atticus who needs Calpurnia.

Chapter 25

Dill and Jem recount what happens when they go to Helen Robinson's.
Mr B.B. Underwood writes a poetic article about Tom's senseless death.

Chapter 26

Scout in the 3rd grade: reflection on Boo Radley no longer seeming frightening.
Miss Gates teaches Scout's class about Hitler. Contradiction as she is racist after trial.

Chapter 27

Ewell gets and loses a job: blames Atticus. Judge Taylor has a secret visitor.
Helen R is harassed by Ewell on the way to work

Chapter 28

Hallowe'en pageant organised by the missionary ladies: Scout in her costume.
Scout forgets her shoes. Jem and Scout are attacked on the way home

Chapter 29

Bob Ewell is dead at the scene of the attack

Chapter 30

Boo Radley is introduced to Scout as Jem's saviour
Heck Tate orders Atticus to accept that Ewell fell on his knife

Chapter 31

Scout stays with Boo, and then walks him home. She imagines their story from Boo's viewpoint
Scout and Jem sleep: Atticus watches over them.